

Where are ... the Barkers?

This film is an initiative of Wooragee Landcare Group motivated by interest raised during wildlife ecologist, Natasha Schedvin's, PhD research into Barking Owls in the local area. Wooragee is a small locality near Beechworth in North East Victoria.

The purpose of this community film is to:



- increase interest & understanding of Barking Owls and their habitat requirements
- motivate land management practices that will enhance the survival of this threatened species.



The name Barking Owl (*Ninox connivens*) reflects the fact that its call sounds very similar to a dog barking.

Barking Owls are a medium sized brown and white owl 35-45cm in length with a wing span of 85-100cm.

Males are slightly larger than females.

The Barking Owl is the most threatened owl in Victoria. They are now considered 'Endangered' and found only in a few isolated large patches mainly in North East Victoria.

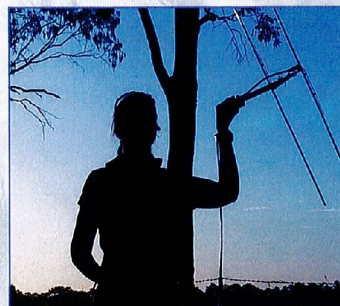


Dr Natasha Schedvin (pictured above) carried out the research for her PhD through Charles Sturt University, Albury. She studied habitat preferences and territorial behaviour of Barking Owls. In order to discover this information, 13 Barking Owls were trapped, carefully measured, weighed, fitted with small radio tracking devices and released.

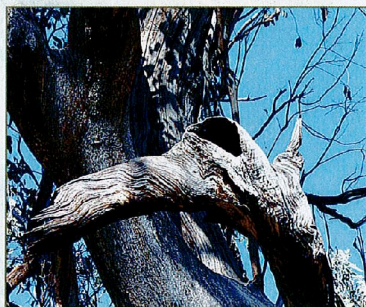
Over many nights, Natasha tracked the movements of these owls to establish the area of each pair's territory. She was also able to build up a picture of the quality of habitat required to sustain a breeding pair. The territory size for pairs varied enormously but the average was 1400 hectares. That's approximately 3 times the size of an average working farm in this area or about the size of the town of Beechworth.

Because Natasha needed to track the owls wherever they went, she approached landholders surrounding the Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park seeking permission to follow the owls onto their properties at night.

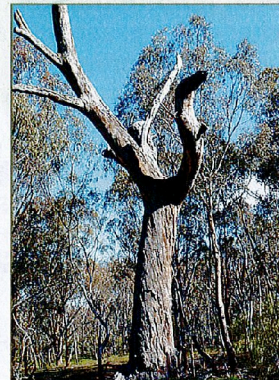
Over 80 landholders gave her permission to enter their land. In Natasha's words: "Knowingly or not they have each contributed to preserving Barking Owls in their area."



Nature does nothing uselessly: Aristotle



I don't think people realise how important hollows are. Did you know it takes over 100 years to form a hollow large enough for my nest? Dead trees, either standing or fallen provide shelter and food (insects, lizards) for lots of animals and birds too. We need all this to survive.



Powerful Owl chick

Q: Do you fly about into different areas much, ever go on holidays?

Betty: No. We are very territorial and too scared to leave our patch because our neighbours (other Barking Owls or the bigger Powerful Owls) might scream at us or even beat us up.

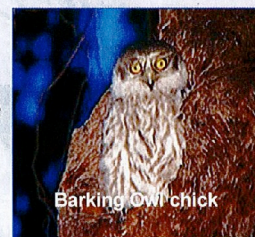
But we'd do the same to any Barking Owl coming into our patch; the kids even get kicked out of home as soon as they're old enough to get their own food.

Q: What can you tell us about partners and bringing up a family?

Betty: Normally we mate for life but as you can see from my story if we lose our partner, we do look for another mate. We nest each year (if there's enough food about). We'll use the same nest hollow most years, although we sometimes have two or three favourites. Nest trees are special - more than just the lovely hollow, they also must have a good tree nearby where Todd can perch and watch out for me and the chicks.

And when the chicks leave the nest there's got to be a tree where they can safely perch out of harms way.

As fledglings (chicks just out of the nest) they sit around begging a lot. At first we have to bring them all their food.



Barking Owl chick



It's hard work hunting for this many mouths — our young family needs at least one Ringtail Possum, (or the equivalent) a night. Slowly our children learn to fly and hunt for themselves. We kick them out of our territory when they are about 6 months old— tough love!

Our nest is down in a large hollow. I lay 2 or 3 round, white eggs and have to sit for about 36 days until they hatch and then another month or so is spent rearing the young to leave the nest.

I'd pop out in the evenings for a quick stretch and then again during the night when Todd returned with his catch of the night for me.



Barking Owl chick

Local landholders became fascinated by Natasha Schedvin's research. Many were not aware that they shared their properties with Barking Owls. Many that did know, did not realise how rare the owls were.

All began to realise they had something very special right in their back yard. Many landholders were interested to learn how they could assist this 'Endangered' species to survive. They are now making small but significant changes in their land management practices to help the owls.

So as Betty Barker says "You can make a difference!"



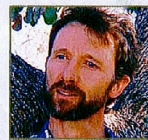
The future of our local Barking Owls is up to us.

Their situation is even more urgent, given that there has been a 60% decline in their population in this area, since the 2003 fires.

Will **you** help?



Russell and Joanne Martin (above) & Tim & Jo Lavers (pictured below) are local landholders who shared their properties with the Barkers & are doing their bit to help the owls.



What can **YOU** do?

- ☛ **Tell other people about Barking Owls**
- ☛ **Help protect big old trees with hollows (including dead ones)**
- ☛ **Leave dead twigs, branches, trees and leaf litter on the ground as habitat and food sources for many birds, mammals, reptiles and insects**
- ☛ **Use plantation timber for firewood**
- ☛ **Help prevent weed invasion of bushland areas to help native grasses and other ground cover plants flourish**
- ☛ **Plant understorey shrubs and native ground cover plants of local indigenous species**
- ☛ **Ssshhh... remember - loud noises (chainsaws, motorbikes) can disrupt owl breeding**



The Barking Owl was listed as 'Threatened' under the Victorian Government Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act, 1988. This was raised to 'Endangered' in 2000 when the Action Statement identified loss of habitat, particularly hollow bearing trees as the primary threat. Regeneration of suitable trees for Barking Owls and their prey is not occurring rapidly enough to cover the losses anticipated over the next century.

Long Term Conservation Objective No 2 (2000) recommends: "Generating community awareness regarding the conservation of Barking Owls and their habitat, and encouraging community support and involvement in the protection and restoration of owl habitat." The project also supports North East Regional Catchment Strategy (1997), Outcome Target No 9 "Decrease in number of the most highly threatened flora/fauna species and communities to levels that support self-sustaining ecosystems."



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts



Film & flier by Osfield.



For copies of 'Where are the Barkers?' DVD
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Photos/stills from film: Jan Osmotherly unless otherwise acknowledged.